ENHANCING COMPREHENSIBILITY AMONG ELF USERS

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ABSTRACT

The predicted widespread use of English as a lingua franca following ASEAN's 2015 integration mushroomed intelligibility studies between and among Asean nationals including Bruneians, Burmese, Cambodians, Filipinos, Indonesians, Laotians, Malaysians, Singaporeans, Thais and Vietnamese. Previous studies regarding ASEAN nationals' intelligibility and/or comprehensibility were reviewed. This paper presents a study of five exposures that relate to the intelligibility and/or comprehensibility within world Englishes speaker-listener paradigm. They are exposures to English through education, work experiences, outside the classroom, social media, and travel and stay abroad. The Comprehensibility Testing Flowchart was used as the main framework of the study and data analysis. The findings show that there are positive correlations and significances between the five variables and the comprehensibility levels Aseans gained in the comprehensibility test.

KEYWORDS: Asean, comprehensibility, education, social media, travel

INTRODUCTION

Two hundred and one students from ten universities within ASEAN participated in this study. These universities are Assumption University, Chiang Mai University, Khon Khaen University, King Mongkut University of Technology North Bangkok, Mahapanya Vidayalai University, Mahidol University, Prince of Songkla University Hat Yai Campus, Rajamangala University Srivijaya Songkhla Campus, Rajamangala University Srivijaya Trang Campus in Thailand, and University of Riau in Indonesia. The diversity of the subjects included undergraduate and graduate students from various fields of studies in education, engineering, health sciences, hospitality and tourism, humanities, and social sciences.

This paper previews related studies on intelligibility and/or comprehensibility before the Comprehensibility Testing Flowchart is presented. The flowchart was derived from various designs of intelligibility and/or comprehensibility studies and was used as the main framework of this study's conceptualization until data analysis. Findings of the questionnaire about factors related to the

comprehensibility of Englishes spoken in the regional bloc such as exposures to English though education, work experiences, outside the classroom (non-educational setting), social media, and travel and stay abroad will be explained. Implications of the study toward teaching English as an International Language and ASEAN will conclude this paper.

INTELLIGIBILITY STUDIES WITHIN ASEAN

There is no doubt that ASEAN's adoption of English as a "working language" led to research strongly suggesting the necessity of English as the bloc's lingua franca (Jenkins, 2000; Kaur, 2010; Kirkpatrick, 2008). While this concept emerged from ELF views, Kachruvian's concentric model (1984, 1985) can not be neglected to explain and understand the global spread of English and the status of English among the Southeast Asian nations. Pakir (2010) and Wilang & Teo (2012a) noted two circles – Outer Circle and Expanding Circles, within Kachru's historical model in the regional bloc. Outer Circle countries are former colonized nations by the English and American powers such as Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. Expanding Circle countries are Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. Moreover, Outer Circle uses English as a second language, except Singapore where it is one of the official languages while Expanding Circle makes use of it as a foreign language. While previous research on intelligibility and comprehensibility shifted from NS-NNS interaction to a growing interest in NNS-NNS interaction between and among Expanding Circle users of English, we cannot ignore the prevalent use of it between Outer Circle-Expanding Circle speaker-listener (Levis, 2005) scenarios. The case of the upcoming single community of Asean where Bruneians, Filipinos, Malaysians, and Singaporeans may use their own varieties of spoken English during their interaction with their counterparts – Burmese, Cambodians, Indonesians, Laotians, Thais and Vietnamese needs research attention. While researches established the existence of intelligibility and/or comprehensibility among Aseans (Kaur, 2010; Kirkpatrick & Deterding, 2005; Wilang & Teo, 2012b), we need to delve into how comprehensibility can be achieved to its highest form. The measurement of comprehensibility levels among the Expanding Circle listeners toward the Outer Circle Englishes (Wilang & Teo, 2012b) is reflected in Table 1.

Table 1: Comprehensibility levels based on nationalities

Nationalities/Englishes		Bruneian English	Malaysian English	Philippine English	Singaporean English
Burmese	M	6.50	6.08 (Least)	6.50	7.08 (Most)
	SD	2.09	1.88	2.03	1.92
Cambodians	M	4.29	5.29 (Most)	5.10	3.76 (Least)
	SD	2.51	2.15	2.28	1.73
Indonesians	M	5.42	5.54	5.58 (Most)	4.84 (Least)
	SD	1.64	1.86	1.52	1.86
Laotians	M	4.42 (Least)	4.92	4.83	5.17 (Most)
	SD	2.54	1.56	2.21	1.75
Thais	M	4.12 (Least)	5.72 (Most)	4.24	4.40
	SD	1.97	1.79	1.98	1.74
Vietnamese	M	4.90	5.57 (Most)	5.01	4.76 (Least)
	SD	2.15	1.73	1.51	1.97

(Permission to reproduce gratefully acknowledged.)

The variations of comprehensibility scores in the above table are widely noted. The most comprehensible variety among Cambodians, Thais and Vietnamese is Malaysian English; Singaporean English among Burmese and Laotians; and, Philippine English among Indonesians. In contrast, Burmese's least comprehensible variety is Malaysian English; among Cambodians, Indonesians and Vietnamese is Singaporean English; and, among Laotians and Thais is Bruneian English. Despite the differing comprehensibility scores toward each spoken variety, Wilang and Teo concluded that there is a moderate comprehensibility of the Expanding Circle listeners toward the Outer Circle speakers.

To what factors shall we attribute intelligibility and/or comprehensibility? Jenkins (2000, 2007) listed pronunciation as a major contributor on unintelligibility. Similar outcomes were reported by Kirkpatrick and Deterding's (2005) study among Aseans.

Other published factors are as follows: speaker factors other than pronunciation are lexical stress and vowel quality (Field, 2005), syntactic forms (Meierkord, 2004), lexical variations (Seidlhofer 2001; Nelson, 1995) pragmatics (Pickering, 2001) and discourse structure (Meierkord, 2004); and, listener factors are attitude toward the speakers (Lippi-Green, 1997; Wilang & Teo, 2012b), familiarity toward the spoken variety (Pickering, 2001), English proficiency of the listeners (Matsuura, 2007; van der Walt, 2000; Wilang & Teo, 2012b), level of tiredness (Field, 2003), and environmental noise (Rogers, Dalby & Nishi, 2004).

Within ASEAN's speaker-listener context, we look at the following factors related to the comprehensibility scores of Expanding Circle nationals: exposure to English through education in a normal, bilingual and international curriculum from pre-school schooling to graduate studies; exposure to English through work experiences in their own country or abroad; exposure to English outside the classroom such as in English and cultural clubs; exposure to English through social media by using social networks (facebook, twitter, skype), watching English TV channels and movies, and reading English newspapers; and, exposure to English through travel and stay abroad in Australia, Britain, Brunei, Canada, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, USA and Vietnam.

METHODOLOGY

In an attempt to explain the procedures used in this study, Figure 1 summarizes the totality of this study's design in a flowchart. The central foci of the testing flowchart are pilot testing and data analysis. The departure in the flowchart starts from any of the following: instrument design, listener/speaker, linguistics, and input.

The instrument design encompasses testing instruments, drafting and expert's check as a prerequisite before pilot testing. This study utilized a comprehension test[1] and questionnaire. The test consists of forty questions derived from eight sections; ten questions based on two sections of two spoken text and/or five questions in each variety of spoken English. While the result of the comprehension test was reported in another paper (Wilang & Teo, 2012b), the outcome of the questionnaire on various exposures is tackled in this paper.

Another factor is the speaker/listener considerations. In this study, we considered the following in the selection of our sample population. The nationalities of the listeners must be one of the following including Burmese, Cambodians, Indonesians, Laotians, Thais and Vietnamese; age – 20's and beyond,

gender, first languages/mother tongues, parents' nationalities and countries of origins, language proficiencies, work experiences, educational background, English usage outside the classroom, English usage in social networks, and travel and stay abroad.

In our separate paper (Wilang & Teo, 2012b), the findings revealed the following: all subjects' nationalities and countries of origins were identified in the Expanding Circle countries and they were currently studying within the Expanding Circle universities. There is no correlation between the subjects' language proficiencies of the spoken languages in the Outer Circle and comprehension scores except English where a positive correlation was indicated; and, Expanding Circle citizens are becoming bilingual or multilingual. Thus, this paper only tackles the five exposures listed in the questionnaire.
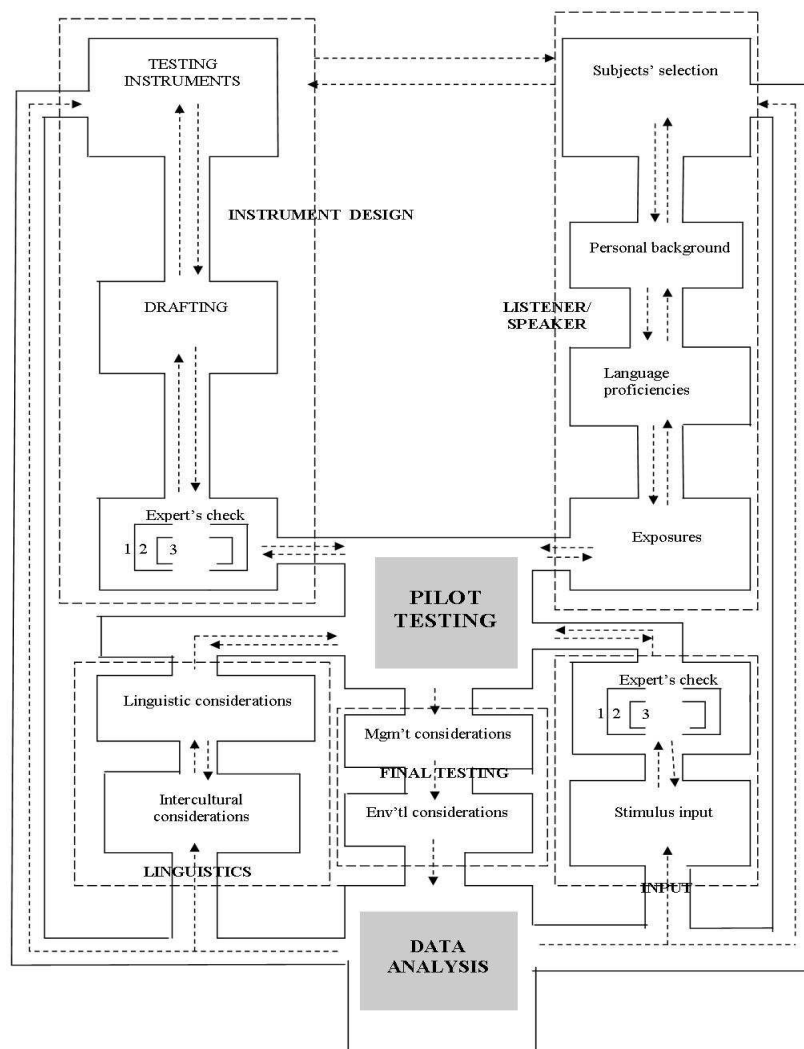
Figure 1: Comprehensibility testing flowchart

The input refers to spoken Englishes, namely Bruneian English, Malaysian English, Philippine English and Singaporean English. The correct representations of the input were

intelligibly identified by two native speakers of each of countries in the Outer Circle. The speed and clarity of the spoken text was considered. The video clip illumination was enhanced. Further, the length of each spoken text is not too short and long but within 54-64 seconds.

The linguistic considerations include checking the frequency of spoken native words, thereby selecting spoken text mixed with native words but must not sacrifice the context of the topic. Since we used the speaker-listener paradigm in this study where no face-to-face interaction and negotiation happened, the cultural content of the video clips was minimized by selecting general topics such as food and everyday life.

After the result of the pilot testing and revisions were instituted, we coordinated with universities within the Expanding Circle countries. Due to limitations on accessibility, communication, and availability, ten universities partcipated, namely Assumption University, Chiang Mai University, Khon Khaen University, King Mongkut University of Technology North Bangkok, Mahapanya Vidayalai University, Mahidol University, Prince of Songkla University Hat Yai Campus, Rajamangala University Srivijaya Songkhla Campus, Rajamangala University Srivijaya Trang Campus in Thailand, and University of Riau in Indonesia.

The final step of the flowchart is data analysis where the results of the comprehension test and questionnaire were analyzed and interpreted by going back to all dynamics of this study's conception: instrument design, subject selection, stimulus input and linguistic considerations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study will focus on the correlation coefficients between the subjects' comprehension scores (as shown in Table 1) and exposures to English through education, work experiences, outside the classroom, social media, and travel and stay abroad.

Exposure to English through education

Table 2. Correlation coefficients between exposure to education and comprehension scores	
Educational levels	Comprehensibility Scores
Pre-school	-.009
Primary	.009
Secondary	.013
Undergraduate	.048
Graduate	.297**

*** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level*

Using Pearson Correlation formula, Table 2 shows the relationships between comprehension scores and various educational levels particularly pre-school, primary, secondary, undergraduate and graduate studies. It is interesting to note the significant positive correlation between graduate studies and comprehension scores ($r=.297$, $p = .000$).

Exposure to English through work experiences and outside the classroom

The correlation between the subjects' comprehensibility and exposures to English through work experiences and outside the classroom is outlined in Table 4. The prompts subjects had to answer are: (1) Have you ever used English as your official language and/or second language in your workplace? If yes, how often? and, (2) Have you ever spoken English outside the classroom? If yes, in what setting? If yes, how often? While the first prompt was not applicable to all subjects since most were students, graduate students who were working while studying and undergraduate interns were able to tick 'yes'. The exposure of the students, particularly, Thai undergraduates in hospitality studying at Rajamangala University of Srivijaya- Trang Campus showed beneficial to understanding the Outer Circle speakers. For example, they were able to interact with their fellow Aseans such as Filipinos, Malaysians, and Singaporeans as well as non-Aseans including Americans, British, Canadians, Russians, among others. It is not surprising to see the significant positive correlation between exposure to English by working and comprehensibility scores ($r=.250$, $p = .001$).

The second prompt of using English outside the classroom but excluding work experiences also yields positive relationship between the two variables. Although the correlation is not significant ($r=.077$, $p= .138$), using English to communicate with other people in English clubs, cultural clubs, in the market, in the dormitory, among others helped the listeners' intelligibility and/or comprehensibility.

Table 4. Correlation coefficients between exposures to English through work experiences and outside the classroom and comprehensibility scores

Exposures	Comprehensibility scores
Exposure through work experiences	.250**
E xposure outside the classroom	.077

** . *Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level*

Exposure to English through social media

Table 5 clearly shows significant positive correlation between the four variables such as the use of English in social network, watching English TV channels, reading newspapers and watching movies and the subjects' comprehension scores. The results show the following: between social network and comprehension scores ($r = .149$, $p = .017$); between watching English TV channels and comprehension scores ($r = .156$, $p = .014$); between reading newspapers and comprehension scores ($r = .198$, $p = .002$); and, between watching English movies and comprehension scores ($r = .262$, $p = .000$). While we can deduce the significance of each variable to the comprehensibility scores of the subjects, we cannot explain how the social media affected their comprehensibility. Further, the kind of TV programs the subjects watched, the newspapers they had read, the movies they had watched, and the people they interacted with in social networks were not asked. These findings, however, can safely establish that exposure to social media significantly affected the comprehensibility of the listeners.

Table 5. Correlation coefficients between exposure to social media and comprehension scores

Questions	Comprehension Scores
1. Do you use English in social network (Facebook, Twitter, Skype, others?	.149*
2. Do you watch English in TV channels?	.156*
3. Do you read English newspapers?	.198**
4. Do you watch English movies?	.262**

** . *Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level*

 . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Exposure to English through travel and stay abroad

The last factor discussed in this paper is exposure to English through travel and stay abroad. The questionnaire asked the subjects to tick the countries they had visited and indicate length of stay. Among the four countries in the Outer Circle, the absence of Brunei in the list is visible. Among the eight countries shown in Table 6, only Thailand has a significant positive correlation ($r = .254$, $p = .000$).

Table 6. Correlation coefficients between exposure to English through travel and stay abroad and comprehension scores

Travel and Stay Abroad	Comprehension Scores
Australia	-0.16
Britain	.026
Canada	.059
Malaysia	.004
Philippines	.096
Singapore	.049
Thailand	.254**
USA	.093

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It is clear from the preceding findings that the five exposures identified have varying degrees of relationships on the subjects' comprehension scores. It is important to note these inconsistencies reported in the tables above and not to overgeneralize the results of this study. Nevertheless, the exposures to English through education, work experiences, outside the classroom, social media, and stay and travel abroad provide us technical tips on how to enhance our intelligibility and/or comprehensibility in the upcoming 2015 Single Community. To this effect, we looked at how this research guides teachers and policy makers on how important intelligibility becomes to date.

Implications to teaching English as an international language

The use of English as a lingua franca within ASEAN gives caution to educators and teachers to move into intelligibility attainment rather than native-like proficiency. The notion that American English or British English as the perfect target models in teaching English is waning and that a shift to international model is happening (Jenkins, 2003; McKay, 2003; Pickering, 2001). Since pronunciation may cause unintelligibility, teachers need to expose students to authentic materials. As we cannot utilize exposure to travel and stay abroad for financial reasons and practicality, we can use social media instead. However, responsible use of social network and online information must be observed at all times. As teachers, before we walk into the classroom and convince our students to respect varieties of Englishes, we need to acknowledge the presence of different linguistic rules and social norms beforehand.

Implications to Asean policy makers

A meaningful policy must be adopted by ASEAN to promote interaction rather than superficial exchange of cultural presentations and shows. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community as the forefront organization must support language activities between and among the nationals of the member nations. Cultural and educational exchanges must be enhanced and multiplied in response to the positive effects of exposure to travel and stay abroad. Visa restrictions imposed by member-countries must be carefully reviewed. Access to education must be universal. Academic linkages must be established. And exchange of information must not be restricted.

NOTES

1. The comprehension test results were presented in Wilang & Teo's (2012b) paper entitled, "Measuring the comprehensibility of Englishes within ASEAN among Aseans".

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE

Name……………………………………………University……………………………………

Dear Respondents: This questionnaire is part of a graduate research on Comprehensibility of Englishes within ASEAN. Please try to answer all the items in the questionnaire diligently and honestly. Thank you so much!

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

1. Age: (   ) 21-30   (   ) 31-40   (   ) 41-50   (   ) Over 51 years

2. Sex: (   ) Male   (   ) Female

3. Nationality   (   ) Burmese   (   ) Cambodian   (   ) Indonesian

                                      (   ) Laotian   (   ) Thai   (   ) Vietnamese

4. Country of origin   (   ) Myanmar   (   ) Cambodia   (   ) Indonesia

                                        (   ) Laos   (   ) Thailand   (   ) Vietnam

5. Mother tongue / first language *(Spoken language/s at home. You can tick more than one.)*

     (   ) Bahasa Malaysia   (   ) Bahasa Indonesia   (   ) Burmese

     (   ) Chinese   (   ) English   (   ) Filipino   (   ) Javanese

     (   ) Karen   (   ) Khmer   (   ) Lao   (   ) Malay

     (   ) Melayu Brunei   (   ) Tamil   (   ) Thai   (   ) Vietnamese

     (   ) *Others, please specify* _____

6. Parent's nationality and language background

     A. Father

     Nationality   (   ) Burmese   (   ) Cambodian   (   ) Indonesian

                               (   ) Laotian   (   ) Thai   (   ) Vietnamese

                               (   ) *Others, please specify* _____

     Country of origin

                               (   ) Myanmar   (   ) Cambodia   (   ) Indonesia

                               (   ) Laos   (   ) Thailand   (   ) Vietnam

                               (   ) *Others, please specify* _____

C. Mother

Nationality   ( ) Burmese   ( ) Cambodian   ( ) Indonesian

( ) Laotian   ( ) Thai   ( ) Vietnamese

( ) *Others, pls. specify* _____

Country of origin

( ) Myanmar   ( ) Cambodia   ( ) Indonesia

( ) Laos   ( ) Thailand   ( ) Vietnam

( ) *Others, please specify* _____

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCIES

1. Indicate your proficiency in each of the following languages.

2. Advanced means you can listen, speak, read, and write <u>fluently</u>.

3. Intermediate means you can listen, speak, read and write <u>moderately</u>.

4. Beginner means you <u>can hardly</u> listen, speak, read and write.

Language	**Proficiency**		
( ) Bahasa Malaysia	( ) Advanced	( ) Intermediate	( ) Beginner
( ) Chinese	( ) Advanced	( ) Intermediate	( ) Beginner
( ) English	( ) Advanced	( ) Intermediate	( ) Beginner
( ) Filipino	( ) Advanced	( ) Intermediate	( ) Beginner
( ) Malay	( ) Advanced	( ) Intermediate	( ) Beginner
( ) Melayu Brunei	( ) Advanced	( ) Intermediate	( ) Beginner
( ) Tamil	( ) Advanced	( ) Intermediate	( ) Beginner

Others, Please Specify

( ) _____   ( ) Advanced   ( ) Intermediate ( ) Beginner

( ) _____   ( ) Advanced   ( ) Intermediate ( ) Beginner

EXPOSURE TO ENGLISH THROUGH WORK EXPERIENCES

Have you ever used English as your official language and / or second language in your workplace?   ( ) Yes   ( ) No

If Yes, how often?   ( ) Always   ( ) Often

( ) Sometimes   ( ) Rarely

If Yes, in which country have you used English? (*You can tick more than one*)

    ( ) Australia   ( ) Britain   ( )Brunei

    ( ) Cambodia   ( ) Canada   ( ) Indonesia

    ( ) Laos   ( ) Malaysia   ( ) Myanmar

    ( ) New Zealand   ( ) Philippines   ( ) Singapore

    ( ) Thailand   ( ) United States of America

    ( ) Vietnam   ( ) *Others, please specify*_____

EXPOSURE TO ENGLISH THROUGH EDUCATION

<u>*Normal*</u> – when the national language is used to teach all subjects except English*;*

<u>*Bilingual*</u> – when both national language and English are used to teach all subjects;
<u>*International*</u> – when English is used to teach all subjects except the national language course subject

Pre-school   ( ) Normal   ( ) Bilingual   ( ) International

    Place of study (City/Country) _____

Primary   ( ) Normal   ( ) Bilingual   ( ) International

    Place of study (City/Country) _____

Secondary   ( ) Normal   ( ) Bilingual   ( ) International

    Place of study (City/Country) _____

Undergraduate   ( ) Normal   ( ) Bilingual   ( ) International

    Place of study (City/Country) _____

    Field of study *(please specify)*: _____

Graduate Studies ( ) Normal   ( ) Bilingual   ( ) International

    Place of study (City/Country) _____

    Field of study *(please specify)*: _____

EXPOSURE TO ENGLISH OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM (NON-EDUCATIONAL SETTING)

Have you ever spoken English outside the classroom?( ) Yes ( ) No

If Yes, in what setting?   ( ) English clubs( ) Cultural clubs

( ) *Others, please specify*_____

( ) *Others, please specify*_____

( ) *Others, please specify*_____

If Yes, how often?   ( ) Always   ( ) Often

( ) Sometimes   ( ) Rarely

Nationalities of people you interact with(*You can tick more than one*)

( ) American   ( ) British   ( ) Burmese

( ) Canadian   ( ) Cambodian ( ) Indonesian

( ) Laotian   ( ) Filipino   ( ) Thai

( )
Malaysian

( ) Singaporean

( ) *Others, please specify*_____

EXPOSURE TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Tick your answers accordingly.

5 – Always, 4 – Often, 3 – Sometimes, 2 – Rarely, 1 – Never

	5	4	3	2	1
Do you use English in social network (facebook, twitter, skype, others)?					
Do you watch English TV channels?					
Do you read English newspapers?					
Do you watch English movies?					
Others, please specify					

EXPOSURE TO ENGLISH THROUGH TRAVEL AND STAY ABROAD

Tick the "length of stay" and "purpose of visit" appropriately according to the countries you have visited listed below.

Length of stay

A = Less than a week   **B** = Less than a month   **C** = 1 – 3 months

D = 4 – 6 months   **E** = 7 – 9 months   **F** = 10 – 12 months

G= More than a year

Purpose of visit

STY = Study   **TRL** = Travel   **BSS** = Business   **CFE**   =   Conference
        OTH = other purposes, please specify

Countries visited	Length of stay							Purpose of visit				
	A	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E**	**F**	**G**	**STY**	**TRL**	**BSS**	**CFE**	**OTH**
Australia												
Britain												
Brunei												
Cambodia												
Canada												
Indonesia												
Laos												
Malaysia												
Philippines												
Singapore												
Thailand												
USA												
Vietnam												